

# IMMUNIZING CUSTOMERS AND THE PUBLIC AGAINST DEMAGOGUERY

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Ladies and Gentlemen, let me tell you how I got into this business of water recycling. I was a normal civil engineer doing my normal engineering work and analyzing environmental issues raised in a variety of EIRs. It just so happened that more and more, I was being assigned to EIRs and EISs involving water reuse. This was in the 1970s. Then the Monterey food crop irrigation project (at Keith Israel's agency) came along and they needed someone with a mix of agronomy, engineering, and environmental know-how. I happened to be at the right place at the right time. Eleven years later, I had become a water reclamation expert—having under my belt the most sweeping investigation of the safety of recycled water for irrigation of such raw-eaten crops as lettuce and cauliflower. If nothing else convinces a person that this water is safe, that experience will. From a skeptic, I had turned into a convert, well-grounded in science.

Science—according to Carl Sagan, in his 1997 book—is a candle in the sea of darkness, ignorance and superstition. Carl Sagan also talks about pseudoscience, a kind of superstition practiced by demagogues who exploit the inability of the majority of people to judge the veracity of technical information for themselves. Most people, world-wide, happen to be scientifically illiterate, and unfortunate though that is, it imposes a greater challenge to those of us trying to communicate technical information. By the same token, it makes the task of the demagogue that much easier. He does not have to prove anything; all he needs to do is to cast doubt and make accusations. By the time his accusation has been heeded, it is too late already.

Winston Churchill is credited with saying “Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the alternatives.” Public decision-making is not always rational. In fact, there are so many other considerations in public decision-making, that logic, science, and even truth sometimes get the short-end of the stick. In my title, I used the word “demagoguery”, and I feel a bit self-conscious doing so. The word “demagogue”, nowadays associated with such hateful characters as Hitler, Bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein, may be too strong a word to use in a genteel setting such as this. Let me offer my apologies up front if this term offends anyone's sensibilities. However, I must go on using it because it helps me make a point that I need to make here. Here is what the Dictionary says about a demagogue—**“A leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims and promises to gain power.”** Popular prejudices, false claims, promises—tools of the demagogue.

In total darkness, anyone with the dimmest candle can lead. In bright sunlight, it is almost impossible to lead people astray. Now, how do we **immunize** our customers and

our publics against demagoguery? Obviously, even the most lame-brained leader-candidate would not use a prejudice and a falsehood that is already well established in the community as a prejudice and as a falsehood. But, those of us who are about my age or older would well remember a time when racial prejudices were commonly used in election campaign attacks on opponents quite successfully. Falsehoods and half truths are commonly used, even today, by too many campaigners hoping that a large enough segment of the voting public does not learn about the falsehood until after the election. Let me hasten to add that I am not at all questioning the right of any member of the public to opine about recycled water—no matter how negative. I just want to make a distinction here between genuine questioning and debate on the one-hand, and demagoguery on the other. The line may be blurred at times, but a few examples might help distinguish the demagogue from the honest questioner. From recent experience, let me give you a few examples of demagogues using half-truths, falsehoods, and public prejudices in derailing water recycling projects:

- Anti-growth activists posing as environmentalists concerned about public health
- Home-Owner Association leaders claiming that “recycled water is not absolutely safe,” and a naïve City Council that goes along with them.
- School Board members claiming children will drink from puddles in recently irrigated grass—prohibiting use of recycled water at the school yard.
- Candidate for public office posing as a champion of the minorities against imposition of an injustice.
- Candidate for public office proclaiming “Lips that touch reclaimed water shall never touch mine”.
- Pseudo-scientist confused about the difference between chlorine and chloride, yet fully convinced that chlorination is not an adequate means of disinfecting recycled water.

Well, folks, the serum for **immunizing** against such tactics in the case of recycled water is no different that in electing the most qualified candidate for office. Spread the truth early and expose the lies. Don’t let your opponent define you and your issues for you. While exposing the lies may be technically and financially feasible, countering prejudices is not quite so easy. The prejudice and disgust against our own waste is something with which we are hard-wired at birth, reinforced with toilet training, and emphasis on hygiene, and continuously reinforced all through our lives. Now, that is a prejudice we all share and no one is ashamed of—in fact, we take proud in our cleanliness. So, how do we, water reuse practitioners, break through this intimate and useful prejudice when the product we are trying to sell was once mixed in with human waste? We do it by bringing a focused light on the subject of water recycling. That is the silver bullet, the immunizing serum, if you will. Three key components of the immunization campaign are:

- **Public Awareness**
- **Public Involvement**
- **Public Education**

- The more aware the public is of water recycling success stories (and there are thousands, just in California alone) the less likely it is to fall prey to demagogues
- The more involved the public is in the decision leading to choice of water recycling, the more likely it is to think it a good idea;
- The more educational materials are provided in a community about water recycling, the harder it is for the demagogue to sell half-truths and to exploit the prejudices of the public.

My favorite tool to prevent successful demagoguery against water recycling is **Training**. Agencies planning a water reuse project—especially in virgin territory—should train their own staff, their consultants, and the local office holders to use appropriate terms in describing recycled water, to know the statistics about successful water recycling projects, and to know where to direct members of the public with legitimate questions. Training is not a requirement, but it is a necessity for successful project implementation, because if the staff walks the walk and talks the talk, the customers are likely to follow; they are likely to ignore a crackpot who has the nerve, the raw chutzpah, to go around calling the purest water on the face of the earth “toilet water”.

Professionals in the advertising, public awareness, and education fields have all the know-how for public awareness campaigns and programs. It is not my intent to repeat their tool boxes of ideas and means of getting the message across. Others on the panel today have already done this, quite well, in fact. My own experience and my reading of the survey research work conducted to date tells me that lack of familiarity with water recycling in the community is the most fertile ground necessary for a demagogue’s message to succeed. The community is ripe for all kinds of mischief if it knows nothing about recycled water, regulations governing its use, treatment processes involved in getting it to the customer, and all the monitoring and reporting that must be complied with. Lack of awareness is the equivalent of the darkness in which demagogues can flourish. By getting there first, they can spread half-truths about recycled water. What half truth am I talking about? Well, recycled water does originate as sewage, doesn’t it? If that is ALL you know about it, you would want nothing to do with it either. Toilet-to-tap is a complete bald-faced falsehood...and if that is the first thing you hear about the project and if that is all you hear about it, you would be smart to vote against it.

So, my colleagues and friends, light a candle, light many candles of good, honest public information to immunize potential customers and the general public by vanquishing the darkness. I could give you many examples of places where the darkness has been conquered and people have seen the light. In those places, rumors and pejoratives and falsehoods have not taken hold. We have over 4,000 sites in California where recycled water is in use—successfully and beneficially, with not a single case of a proven public health problem. There is no reason why the 4001<sup>st</sup> site should encounter resistance—whether it is in Redwood City, in Livermore, or in Calabasas—except for the fact that public ignorance is providing a welcome mat for the demagogue.